

# AUTHENTIC VIDEO IN THE BEGINNING ESOL CLASSROOM: Using a Full-Length Feature Film for Listening and Speaking Strategy Practice

**A**S MANY TEACHERS CAN ATTEST, LEARNERS SEEM TO BECOME MORE MOTIVATED about language learning when video is involved, especially authentic video. Feature films attract learners' attention with dazzling Hollywood effects, and because they aren't designed for instructional purposes, they reflect authentic use of the target language. However, because of the authenticity of the language, teachers tend to limit their use of feature films to intermediate-to-advanced level classrooms. Some instructors prefer dealing with video clips, rather than an entire film. This is unfortunate because there are advantages to using a full-length feature film for beginners. In this article, we discuss the theoretical grounds for using video material; describe our experiences teaching adult beginners listening and speaking strategies using the film *What about Bob?*; and discuss assessment as well as anticipated problems, and possible solutions, associated with the use of feature films in the ESOL classroom.

### Rationale for the use of feature film

Authentic full-length film brings extended context and interesting content to the classroom. By using film, an oral skills course and other skill courses may be integrated through the use of common themes, functions, and/or grammar featured in the film. Although listening activities in oral skills textbooks may share a theme, they are unlikely to carry much intriguing content at the beginning level. Moreover, text activities, unlike films, are often disconnected. The use of film, however, provides a rich context by which students can improve comprehension and practice listening and speaking (Altman 1989, Kitajima and Lyman-Hager 1998, Burt 1999, and Stoller 1993).

Arcario (1993) and Lonergan (1984) point out that the extended context, interesting content, rich visual imagery, and often exaggerated actions and gestures of film provide students with multi-sensory input that is close to what they would find in real-life communication. Such visual input is engaging and motivating to learners, and because of film's many contextual clues, helps students' comprehension of the language used in the film (Chapple and Curtis 2000). Moreover, film's multi-sensory input is likely to assist in more effective memory retention, since it requires viewers to use the right hemisphere of the brain in addition to the left, which is already activated for language learning.

Another benefit of introducing authentic content through film is that it provides a focus for discussing language and culture (Altman 1989, Burt 1999, Stempleski 1993, Donley 2000). Cultural aspects of the film, such as customs and humor, or culturally specific use of language, such as idioms, could be discussed with learners, or learners could exercise their powers of observation to inductively learn functional use of language (e.g., speech act realizations, Rose 1997).

### Why *What about Bob?*

Since humor has long been considered an effective way to lower learners' affective filter and thus maximize language learning, a comedy like *What about Bob?* is a good choice for anxious learners. The film is a comedy about Bob, a psychiatric patient who comes to completely trust his new psychologist, Leo. Bob follows Leo on vacation for help with his

problems and gets acquainted with Leo's family, who come to like Bob. However, Leo gets increasingly irritated with Bob and attempts to isolate him from his family.

This film works well with beginning-level learners. With assistance, the language is not too dense or difficult for them. Even though the natural rate of speech used in the film is likely to present a challenge for such learners, with repeated viewing and help with vocabulary, they can understand most of the plot line. The story sparks interest and enthusiasm. In fact, the compelling story line keeps learners interested and willing to stretch their comprehension of the language and content. The humor in the film seems to relax nervous learners and enhance their language learning. The humor is also non-offensive and of a type so universally familiar that people from different cultures can understand and appreciate it.

Since the film encourages viewers to predict future occurrences, it is suitable for practicing inferring and predicting skills. The film is also so rich in action and visual aides that it is appropriate for speaking activities, such as describing scenes and actions. We will demonstrate this point later. Finally, because the film is neither very recent nor a blockbuster, it is unlikely that many learners would have seen it prior to instruction.

### Logistics of teaching with full-length feature film

There are a variety of ways to divide the film into manageable sections. In our beginning level program, classes met for two hours from two to five days a week, but the video lesson was taught only once or twice a week for 50 minutes each. We divided the film *What about Bob?* into 10 segments of approximately 10 minutes each and played each segment in a language lab or the regular classroom. At minimum, a television and a VCR are needed; it would be best to teach in a language lab with a large screen and individual corrals containing headphones, especially for certain activities, such as those described later in Activity 1. Other materials would include handouts with tasks pertaining to the particular scene and language use, and cassette tapes and tape players for assessing individual student's speaking skills while carrying out specific tasks. Although it is possible to use video to focus on



"Don't stop  
[the video] now.

We want  
to see more!"

"I have  
an appointment  
on Wednesday,  
so I can't come  
to class. Am I  
going to miss  
[What about]

Bob?

—learners' comments  
on a  
video lesson



writing, grammar, and pronunciation (Aiex 1999, Parker 2000, Stempleski and Tomalin 1990), we used it to improve listening and speaking skills.

### Teaching objectives and activities

To best serve learners of diverse backgrounds, specific teaching objectives should be set at the outset of instruction. In our case, four groups of learners were adult ESOL students from around the globe, ranging from age 18 to their mid 30s. Some learners were planning to attend an American university; others were learning English for better job opportunities or study-abroad experience. Still others were immigrants to the United States learning English to improve their quality of life. Our initial student survey showed that all of them would welcome the use of technology such as video and computers. Taking such students' learning goals and preferences into consideration, the following teaching objectives were decided upon in order to equip learners with listening and speaking strategies (Oxford 1989):

1. Understanding the background information
2. Observing the characters
3. Making an inference
4. Listening for general ideas
5. Listening for specific information
6. Describing a situation
7. Describing a series of actions
8. Making a prediction
9. Understanding culture
10. Telling the whole story and stating opinions (also see the assessment section)

### Pre-viewing, viewing, and post-viewing activities

Effective use of an authentic film, especially in a beginning level classroom, requires careful planning and appropriate teacher guidance of pre-viewing, viewing, and post-viewing activities (Burt 1999, Stempleski 1993, Stoller 1993). Pre-viewing activities are used to tap into the students' background knowledge or to review the previous segment of the film. Key vocabulary is introduced, and learners can read the comprehension questions on the handout and predict the answers. Such pre-viewing activities stimulate learners' imag-

inations, spark their interests, and aid in comprehension of the segment. While viewing, it is recommended that they focus on the gist of the content and watch carefully so as not to miss important visual clues. The instructor can play the segment or part of it more than once if necessary to ensure learners' understanding. Post-viewing activities include going over the answers to the comprehension questions, predicting future occurrences, and getting learners to practice the language through role-play and summaries. Whereas pre-viewing and viewing activities center on understanding input, post-viewing activities focus on output practice.

### Sample activities

Two activities are described here to demonstrate the ways in which some of the listening and speaking strategies can be learned and practiced through class activities while being taught inductively. In our classrooms, these activities were implemented using the video *What about Bob?* but similar tasks can be done with other videos. The first activity below makes use of teaching objective #4 (listening for general ideas), #2 (observing characters), #6 (describing a series of actions) and #7 (describing a situation). The second activity combines teaching objective #2, #4, and #8 (making a prediction). Depending upon class size and student level, the time required for these activities is generally from 45 minutes to one hour.

#### Activity 1: The lake scene

The lake scene is a short film clip (about 1 to 2 minutes) during which Leo takes his son Siggy to the dock to teach him how to dive. The scene offers a variety of visual and auditory clues, which assist in comprehension of the key language used. What makes this activity so motivating is that learners are not asked to passively watch and repeat back what they saw or heard; rather, they are to take separate roles, one as the listener and one as the viewer, practicing listening and speaking strategies for effective comprehension.

**Pre-viewing activities:** Learners should be prepared for as much of the vocabulary as possible short of giving away what happens in the scene. For example, a short lesson on action verbs that includes verbs used in the scene, among others, would be plenty. It is not nec-

essary to prepare learners for all new vocabulary words because they can be learned through attention to context clues. When the vocabulary lesson is finished, learners are supplied with a scene title and short description of the scene. One suggested title is simply *The Lake Scene*, followed by the description, "Leo is teaching Siggy how to do something."

**Viewing activities:** The class should be divided into pairs. One learner is asked to be a viewer, the other a listener. The setup will differ depending on the available media resources, that is, whether the class is in a language lab or in a classroom with a TV and VCR. Listeners may only listen to the video clip, and they should turn around or sit behind the TV. Viewers may only watch the clip, and they should either take off their headphones or plug their ears. Listening strategy is emphasized by having the listeners write down key words and pay attention to tone of voice, intonation, and pauses. For listeners, a short cloze activity can be designed as an alternative to note taking. For instance, the viewers can write down verbs that describe the actions in the scene and pay attention to nonverbal communication (body posture, gestures and facial expressions) and the setting to get a general idea of what is happening in the scene. Note that the video clip should be played two or three times until each learner feels somewhat confident about his/her listening or viewing task.

**Post-viewing activities:** When learners are ready, they return to their partners and collaborate to create an account of the situation just seen or heard in the film. Viewers are encouraged to demonstrate what they saw; listeners supply the language, which they can do more readily because they had heard many of the words used.

To wrap up this activity, pairs are asked to share their conclusions with the class. It would be nice to show the video once more to give all learners an opportunity to listen and watch at the same time. It is often motivating to conclude with a communicative activity, such as a role-play task. Learners look for good qualities of communication and cheer for the best-performing actors. Teachers may want to consider recording these role-plays on videotape to use for additional language feedback, to review new vocabulary, or to demonstrate the stu-

dents' progress at the end of the term.

### **Activity 2: The dinner scene**

The second activity comes from a scene in the latter part of the film in which Bob, the patient, is invited to dinner at Leo's house. This is an unpleasant situation for Leo, who is trying to drive Bob away. With this scene, learners listen for the flow of the dinner conversation and how utterances are connected to each other. Later they go over key vocabulary and they practice appropriate intonation, which plays an integral role in this segment. In addition, the learners predict what might follow this scene.

**Pre-viewing activities:** Learners are informed that in this scene Bob is eating dinner at Leo's house. As a bridge from the previous scene, learners can discuss why Bob has been invited. Learners are also encouraged to observe carefully what happens at the dinner table. Learners are encouraged to observe how everyone feels in this scene and why they feel the way they do.

**Viewing activities:** Learners are asked to remember the flow of the conversation as much as possible so that they can reconstruct the dinner conversation later from memory. After viewing, learners, in groups of three, get an envelope containing strips of paper printed with lines of dialog from the scene; they must rearrange the strips to recreate the dinner conversation. At this stage, learners might need some help. The instructor can play the video more than once, or stop the video to enable the learners to catch up and do more work with the strips. Alternatively, learners could read over these strips before watching the video. When the reordering is completed, the students review the order of the strips and discuss the language and content. Use of appropriate intonation can be another focus of discussion, since various tones express the different emotions of the characters in this scene.

**Post-viewing activities:** After learners' comprehension is achieved, the students can role-play the scene to practice the language. Each student should hold the strips of paper with the lines of the character he/she is portraying and should try to make appropriate eye contact with the other students in their group as they read the lines. By listening carefully to the other role-players, students will know when to speak their lines. The students are encouraged

to express the characters' emotion using suitable intonation, as discussed and practiced earlier.

To conclude this set of activities, learners are asked to predict what is going to happen after a scene in which Leo, the doctor, is choking and coughing severely. If they have difficulty with this task, the instructor can prompt them to think about what the wife, children, or Bob might do in that situation. Although learners are likely to be disappointed about not being able to see the rest of the film immediately, this predicting activity encourages them to start forming a habit of predicting what might occur subsequently, which will assist in better listening comprehension.

### **Assessment**

As with any material learned in the classroom, teachers must assess their learners' comprehension and progress. Although we could have used several different assessment methods for our film activity, we chose to use the following three: (1) informal assessments done during classroom discussions and when monitoring individual or pair/group work, (2) occasional collection of activity handouts to check comprehension, and (3) a tape journal assignment done at the conclusion of the film in which learners recorded their responses to guided questions on cassette tapes. Questions included in a handout asked the students to describe the characters and events and to summarize the film. Learners also were asked to describe one incident in the film and state their opinion of the event. We responded individually to students' answers on the tape with feedback on their language use, summaries, and opinions.

The informal assessment during the class counted towards learner's participation grade; collected handouts were assessed as part of the occasional assignments for various topics. Two other tape journals were assigned for topics unrelated to *What about Bob?*, so this particular tape journal entry counted for one-third of the final tape journal grade.

### **Anticipated problems and possible solutions**

As we have seen, a full-length authentic video can be used quite successfully in the language classroom. However, it is important to

consider, prior to instruction, the problems that could occur. The first, and probably the most common, problem is that learners may feel overwhelmed by the authentic language used in the film. To forestall this problem, learners can be asked to focus on general ideas rather than details. Second, because this video has been around for some time, there is the possibility that learners might have seen it in their native languages. If so, these learners can be asked to focus in greater detail on, for example, the language used in the film. Such students could be used to assist other learners, thereby enabling them to practice English for a meaningful purpose at the same time that they are helping their classmates. Third, some learners may claim that they can watch movies on their own and that doing so in class is a waste of time. To counter this argument and assure learners of the usefulness of video in the classroom, it is important to incorporate into the lessons a great deal of speaking practice, new vocabulary and expressions, cultural information, and other challenging tasks. Fourth, as with most commercial movies these days, offensive language is likely to be included in a film you choose. Students need to be reminded that such language is authentic and goes with the territory of using a non-instructional film. But if the thought of having to discuss four-letter words for language practice makes either the instructor or students cringe, it may be prudent to turn off the sound and have learners simply describe the actions or situations. Another option is not to place importance on the language in that part of the scene. It is appropriate to approach questions about the meanings of offensive words by suggesting that they ask a friend outside of class, and then move on with class. Finally, and possibly the most frequently unanticipated problem, is that there might be technical problems associated with such things as headphones, audio systems, LVD players, VCRs, TV connections, or the language lab's main system. In such cases, it is crucial to have back-up plans, such as a class discussion to check comprehension or review the last section of the video the class watched.

### **Conclusion**

The use of full-length feature film has a definite place in the beginning-level ESOL



classroom. Such films provide meaningful language through interesting content and extended context, thereby enabling learners to become more motivated to learn and communicate in the target language. Once learners gain confidence through understanding and enjoying authentic film, they might feel prepared to view other films at their leisure. The more we emphasize the learning strategies associated with listening comprehension and speaking, the more likely it will be that learners will apply them as they venture into authentic language.

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